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The Dream of the Mountains' Struggle

*The Clifford M. Lewis
Appalachian Institute of
Wheeling Jesuit University*

By Jessica A. Wrobleski

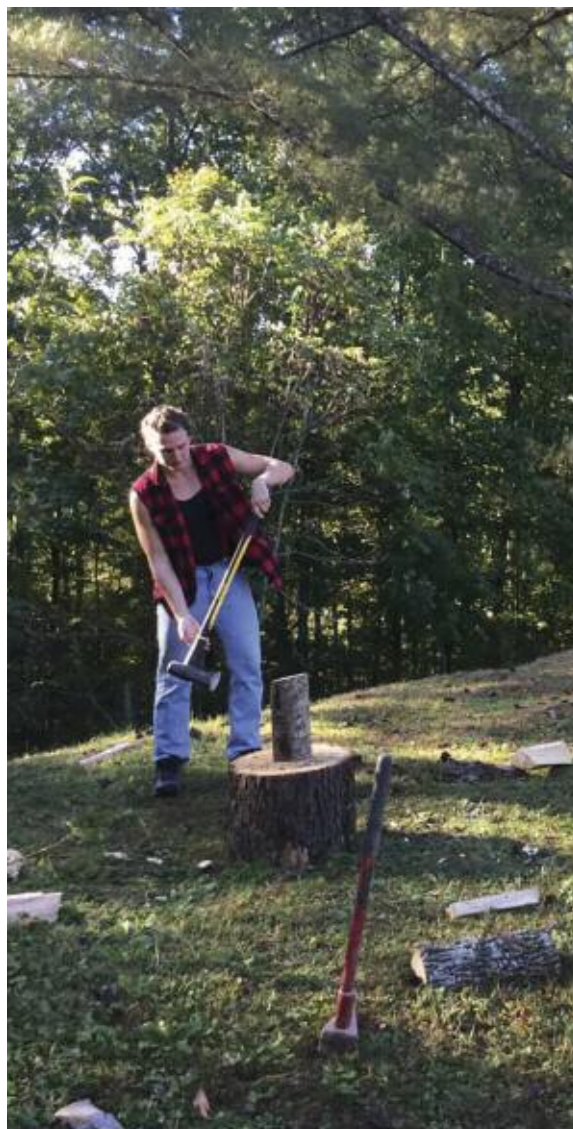
Founded as Wheeling College in 1954, Wheeling Jesuit University has always seen its mission as deeply connected to its place in the hills of Appalachia and the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia. It was at the invitation of the local bishop, John J. Swint, in 1951 that the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus initiated the establishment of a college in West Virginia for the purpose of offering a Catholic liberal arts education to the people of the region. At the time – and in many ways, to this day – Appalachia was a “frontier” for Jesuit education: not only does the region have a relatively small Catholic population and few parochial schools, but rates of post-secondary education are significantly lower than in the nation as a whole. The region has long been shaped by an experience of struggle, and the mission of Wheeling Jesuit University has been, and continues to be, shaped by the region, often sharing in its struggles.

Nearly 50 years after its founding, in 2002 the university established the Clifford M. Lewis, S.J., Appalachian Institute, named for the first Jesuit priest to come to the area for the purpose of starting a college there. Inspired in large part by the vision articulated in the 1975 Appalachian Bishops’ Pastoral, *This Land is Home to Me*, which called for social and church institutions to share in “the dream of the mountains’ struggle,” the institute has a mission of promoting research, service, and advocacy for and with the people of Appalachia to build healthier, stronger, and more sustainable communities. At the time the Appalachian Institute was founded, Bishop Bernard Schmitt of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston stated that “The Appalachian

Institute is a concrete expression of Wheeling Jesuit University’s half-century commitment toward the people of the diocese and the region.”

In its 15-year history, the Appalachian Institute has offered a wide array of programs and opportunities which promote its mission of research, advocacy, and education around the region. In partnership with over 70 community organizations and other university programs, the institute has sponsored events such as a conference on the declining steel industry or, more recently, the opioid crisis; photographic exhibits featuring images from coal mining communities and those affected by the natural gas industry; and films or discussions of issues ranging from food insecurity to health care and energy policy. The Appalachian Institute has also sponsored research on a variety of issues affecting the natural environment and human health, such as investigating the impact of slurry pond impoundments or the relationship between fracking and water quality, and routinely trains students to advocate to legislators (both in Charleston, W.Va., and Washington, D.C.) for issues contributing to justice and health in the region.

Since 2004, a significant part of the educational work of the Appalachian Institute has been through running immersion trips around the region, not only for WJU students but also for students from high schools and colleges – including many Jesuit schools – across the country. The institute offers educational immersion trips that focus on energy policy and its consequences in Appalachia, on issues related to health



care and food justice, as well as direct-service focused trips. Elizabeth Collins, who served as director for the institute from 2012 to 2017, explained that the institute strives to cultivate not only concern but connections, and ultimately a sense of commitment to the region through these trips, both for WJU students and for those who come from outside the area. "We are trying to fight the 'globalization of superficiality,'" in such trips, she explained, "so that students leave feeling a burden [of love] for the region, rather than [feeling] warm and fuzzy because they helped some poor people in Appalachia." Collins emphasized the importance of education through encounter with the people and places of Appalachia in these trips and explained that fighting stereotypes about the region is an important part of the institute's work.

While much of the institute's programming focuses on the complex challenges that the region faces, another important part of its mission is fulfilled through celebration of the region's culture, history, and natural beauty through events such as poetry readings, community meals, films, and other events. Collins, a native West Virginian, explained that both a critical and a celebratory framework are necessary for an adequate view of the region. For students who come from the region as well as for those from outside, offering opportunities to understand and fall in love with this place and its people – finding reasons for resilience in brokenness and hope in struggle – is a vital part of the institute's mission.

For several years, Wheeling Jesuit students have helped to lead immersion trips for outside groups – an experience that many have found deeply transformative. Nic Cochran ('15) was both a participant and a student leader in numerous immersion trips during his time as a WJU student. While Cochran had felt a call to religious life for some time, in large measure it was his experiences with the Appalachian Institute that played a decisive role in his decision to become a priest of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese. "The Appalachian Institute provided the opportunity for encounters with people and places I would not have otherwise known," Cochran said, citing his experience with the people of West Virginia – their creativity and sense of community despite many challenges and negative stereotypes – and the beauty of the land itself as reasons he is committing his life to this place and its people.

No less than in the nation and region as a whole,



All photos show Wheeling Jesuit University students helping community members prepare for winter with wood chopping services.

the past year at Wheeling Jesuit University has been marked by challenge and transition. In May 2017, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston reaffirmed its original commitment to WJU by purchasing the school's long-term debt. Bishop Michael Bransfield stated, "The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has acted to help stabilize the financial operations of the University to ensure they continue their mission here in the Mountain State. As West Virginia's only Catholic institution of higher learning, Wheeling Jesuit University has a special responsibility to offer a Jesuit education in the state and the region, which is enhanced through the beautiful work of the Appalachian Institute." Through this partnership and relationships with those in and beyond the region, the Appalachian Institute will continue in its mission both to celebrate and to share in the struggles of the mountains and the people of Appalachia.

Jessica Wrobleksi is associate professor of theology at Wheeling Jesuit University and a native of West Virginia. She served as a member of the editorial board of Conversations from 2014 to 2017.

Appalachian Institute website:
<http://www.wju.edu/ai/default.asp>